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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationship that traditionally has existed between the domains of business studies and the domain of humanities, of which foreign language study has always been a part. The implications for foreign language departments of instituting courses such as commercial French, of dealing with career education, or of expanding undergraduate language major programs to include the option of business-oriented courses, are discussed. A specific experience in working with the French language component of the Master of International Business Studies program at the University of South Carolina is described. The core of this description concerns the breakdown of usual stereotypes of business students and teachers' changing attitudes towards participating in the language component of business programs. (CLK)

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The Retraining of Humanists for Programs in International Business

Recent years have seen foreign language teachers become increasingly precise in defining words as indeed we should be since we are, after all, specialists in language. In the sixties we, with the help of a goodly number of linguists, subdivided language study into four skill areas. We also expanded, with the help of a goodly number of sociologists, the term culture to include the way of life of a people as well as their greatest artistic, literary, and philosophical achievements. Now, in the seventies we are still in the process of refining our vocabulary and defining our goals. We have come to realize, for example, that people may speak and yet not communicate and this one deceptively simple distinction has already had a tremendous impact on the kinds of activities which are taking place in foreign language classes now in 1975. I mention word analysis because I realize that I must deal this afternoon with a word which is so frequently used that most people have reached the point at which they react to it emotionally rather than intellectually. That word, of course, is the word humanist.

Most of us like to be called humanists. This word evokes a long and generally distinguished academic tradition harking back to the Renaissance; it conjures up pictures of precious manuscripts being snatched from the flames and of great scholar-teachers being

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burned for their beliefs. It connotes freedom and dignity and excellence. It has a nice ring to it. We also like to think that modern foreign languages are properly placed under the collective term humanities. These subjects are, as every good humanist knows, at the heart of a truly liberal education. They have a long and glorious tradition and, hopefully, a promising future.

When I was asked some months ago to give a title to the remarks I intended to make this afternoon, I chose the title "The Retraining of Humanists for Programs in International Business." Since that time I have had ample opportunity to ponder my glib title and to examine its implications. It was my impression that I was using the word humanist to describe. On closer examination, I believe that I was actually using the word not to describe but to set apart. This is not an infrequent use of such a word. The Random House Dictionary, for example, lists as one definition of the humanities "literature, philosophy, art, etc. as distinguished from the sciences."[1] I, in my title, was concerned with drawing a sharp line between the humanities and the world of business. Implicit in the title was the attitude that somehow the humanist and the businessman are basically incompatible and that any alliance between the two is of necessity an unholy alliance. After all, isn't the businessman interested primarily in money and profit while the humanist is chiefly concerned with principles and is content to spend his life in genteel poverty? And how

could a true humanist forsake Racine and become excited over learning how to say "joint venture"? Business and the humanities--strange bedfellows indeed, I thought. Perhaps a necessary marriage of convenience in troubled times but certainly not a desirable alliance.

At some point, however, I began to reflect on the word humanist and on the term liberal arts in a way in which I had not generally considered them before. The first definition of the term humanist given in the Random House Unabridged Dictionary is "a student of human nature or affairs;" the second is "a person having a strong interest in or concern for human welfare, values, and dignity."[2] Now these definitions of a humanist do not seem to me to exclude the world of business. Certainly, a businessman must be concerned with human nature. Perhaps he is even more concerned with his fellow human beings than that scholar cloistered away from the world, alone with his sacred volumes of Racine, whom we generally refer to as a humanist. And this thought led me to the observation that many of the people we call humanists are not very humane, after all, in their dealings with their fellow human beings. Pondering still more paradoxes, I reflected that many people with liberal arts degrees are actually quite conservative. And to verify my speculations I consulted once again Random House. Among the definitions of liberal I found two which especially interested me: "1. liberal: favorable to progress

or reform 2. liberal: open-minded or tolerant, especially free of or not bound by traditional or conventional ideas, values, etc."[3] As I reexamined my own attitude toward my participation in a business-oriented French program, I realized that my conception of a humanist had been far too limited and exclusive and that rather than thinking like a liberal arts major, I was thinking like a hidebound traditional.

I have stressed the matter of attitude rather than knowledge because I think for most of us this is the crucial area. Can we bring ourselves to institute a course in commercial French or Spanish or German without feeling that this is a kind of prostitution? Can we talk about career education without a feeling of gloom and doom? Can we expand an undergraduate language major program to include the option of business-oriented language courses without feeling that we are doing so only out of desperation? These are questions that many of us must deal with. They represent the humanist's dilemma. I decided that a true humanist and a truly liberal person should be open to new experiences and so I agreed to work with the French language component of the Master of International Business Studies program.

As the day approached when I was to meet my first students, I will admit that I had second thoughts about my decision. These would no doubt be people with dollar signs in their eyes and perhaps some of that nasty green dirt under their fingernails. As

I look back, that stereotype seems laughable, ridiculous even. I can honestly say that I have never worked with a more cooperative, more intelligent, more interesting, or more highly motivated group of students. Some are liberal arts undergraduate majors; others took an undergraduate degree in business. And amazingly enough I found that the business majors were just as bright, just as cooperative, just as interesting as those with liberal arts backgrounds. Not only was I impressed with these people as individuals but also with their esprit de corps, their willingness to work together and to help each other. Where was the cutthroat competition that I had expected from business students? Far from trying to cut each other down, these students were willing to tutor each other--and for free. Another stereotype bit the dust--especially when I remembered graduate programs in French literature where competition was so keen that one student would check out of the library and conveniently lose books which he knew the other students would be needing.

I said earlier that the liberal arts majors and business majors were indistinguishable in the French language program. To be perfectly truthful I should revise my statement slightly. One common characteristic shared by the liberal arts majors was fear--fear of that intensive battery of business courses which they would be facing in the fall. How do they feel now that that formidable program is underway? In order to find out I asked them

to answer anonymously three questions: (1) Do you feel that your having specialized in a liberal arts discipline is a disadvantage to you at this point in the MIBS program? (2) If you answered the first question affirmatively, do you view your main problem as a lack of background in business-related courses or a certain incompatibility between humanistic values and business practices? (3) Do you think that in the long run your specialization in the liberal arts will be an advantage or a disadvantage to you in your work in international business? I also invited students to add their own comments. As could have been predicted, every single liberal arts major considered his undergraduate specialization a disadvantage at this point in the program. With one exception, they view their main problem as lack of background, and they all feel that in the long run having specialized in a liberal arts discipline will be a great advantage to them. One non-liberal arts major asked if he could respond to the questionnaire, and his comments were among the most insightful which I received. He wrote: "I think some of the L.A. majors' problems come from a mental stereotype against the business image. Business can be the way to tremendous cultural opportunities. Those who can successfully combine business and the liberal arts will gain respect from two directions. They will be able to interact with more people than those who choose to stay within a narrow specialization." This young man, I think, has a

lot to say to all of us. I personally regard my experience with MIBS as a broadening experience. Of course, I haven't had to undergo such a drastic retraining as the program participants. In fact, the most difficult part of my retraining was changing my attitude. Once I had decided that I could venture out of my sheltered world, the retraining was very simple--chiefly a matter of learning new vocabulary and locating appropriate materials.

Now, lest I be misunderstood, I am not advocating career education and business-oriented courses as a panacea for all our current woes. I believe quite strongly that we must ultimately justify our existence in the curriculum not because we render a service to other disciplines but because we offer something or really a number of things to the student which he cannot obtain through any other course. My point is, however, that we have--and I include myself--often cut ourselves off from the world of business because of an unfortunate stereotype of the business community. Isn't it odd that we foreign language teachers who have worked so hard to break down barriers with other cultures and to enlighten those who have stereotypes of other language groups have ourselves in many instances been unwilling to break down barriers between disciplines and reluctant to abandon our stereotype of the businessman? Language and business--an unholy alliance? Not necessarily, and in many cases not at all.

Wilga Rivers has pointed out that "As language teachers we

are the most fortunate of teachers--all subjects are ours. Whatever the students want to communicate about, whatever they want to read about, is our subject matter.... The essence of language teaching is providing conditions for language learning: we are limited only by our own caution, by our own hesitancy to do whatever our imagination suggests to us."[4] I suggest to you that we humanists should free our imaginations, abandon our caution and approach a partnership with the world of business with open minds and liberal attitudes. In doing so we have not only the opportunity to broaden our own horizons but also to help build bridges of understanding with other countries throughout the world.

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Notes

[1]Jess Stein, ed. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 691.

[2]Ibid., p. 691.

[3]Ibid., p. 825.

[4]Speaking in Many Tongues: Essays in Foreign-Language Teaching (Rowley,Mass.: Newbury House, 1972), p. 68.